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ABSTRACT

The cries of the 1960s for relevance and innovation in the teaching of English have given way to the demands of the 1970s to get back to the basics. Teachers may wonder whether there really was a revolution in teaching in the 1960s or whether traditional English teaching actually prevailed. Whatever the case, it is time for the competing factions in English teaching to reconcile and plan an English for all seasons, immune to changing educational climates and periodic storms of public outrage. The first premise on which such an English may be based is that the English class is the place for students to explore the sending and receiving of messages. The second premise suggests that teachers should present subject matter that deals with timeless issues of literary and intellectual inquiry that are potentially important and interesting to adolescents. In their written responses to literary materials, students should write for logical audiences in such real forms as letters, journal entries, and news stories and should frequently write in voices other than their own. The third premise of an English for all seasons is that basic skills should be encountered and mastered in the doing of real language tasks. (GW)

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AN ENGLISH FOR ALL SEASONS

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AN ENGLISH FOR ALL SEASONS

Exactly eight years ago, I stood behind another NCTE lecturn in Washington, D. C. waiting to begin my twenty minute harangue on English and English teaching. I remember thinking as I looked at page one of my prepared speech that I had never been to a convention so filled with talk — excited, serious talk. Of course, I knew that the animated complex sentence was the stuff of English teachers' get-togethers, but somehow there were more words more passionately expressed than could be explained by the usual linguistic rites and rituals performed at the annual professional bash. Even as I began to speak, I inwardly noted that the air was charged and my audience more attentive than others I had faced. What was it? From whence all of this adrenalin?

Simple. It was 1969, and we were in the middle of what seemed to be a revolution. What a time that was! How many things had happened and were happening that would change our view of what English was all about. The late sixties.... Think back to that ancient age.

The clarion call of the young and idealistic (both students and teachers) was relevance, relevance, relevance; Marshall McLuhan, movie camera and taperecorder in hand, captured us in a flash of light and sound; the British were opening classrooms and dramatizing the link between language and experience, and we panted to keep up with them; the third world was demanding equal time (at least) for other than standard dialects and literatures. Interdisciplinary activity, independent study, and inquiry-centered electives were what the good guys were supposed to be doing;

the villains drilled and droned away with Warriner's Handbook and Adventures For Readers (or their equivalents) and plodded along with chronological surveys of literature and formal language instruction that affected no one's literary or language behavior. And all the while, Postman and Weingartner's subversive teaching provided us with lesson plans for next week's curricular revolutions.

Morale is high; budgets were high; we were high — intoxicated with the possibility that at last our efforts would make a difference in how our students perceived the universe and how they addressed it.

I remember performing the ritual required of every speaker addressing a conference of English teachers: defining what English really is or should be, and I said that day in Washington, "English is anything, yes, anything that calls for disciplined communicative activity by speaker, reader, writer, listener, or viewer" — and proceeded to push hard for using critical issues and ideas as a way of involving students (another favored phrase of the sixties) in the languaging process.

And today, in the trough of the seventies, here we are again — some eight light years later when our highs have slid into hangovers, when the slogans — given our strength to proclaim them — call for survival and the devil take relevance, when the cameras and taperecorders, tangled in a web of extension cords, lie untouched in storerooms with otherwise empty shelves, when innovation, both the word and the deed, is to be avoided as we would avoid a dying friend, when what book budgets remain are used to purchase brightly redecorated editions of Adventures For Readers and you-know-who's Handbook, and when our professional energies have been redirected from curriculum to collective bargaining.

I suppose we deserved what we got, and Kafka's comment that all revolutions evaporate and leave behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy applies in a way to what happened in a good many English classrooms. Relevance came to mean something narrow and restrictive — as if it were somehow unseemly for a slum child to read Greek myths. Openness and student-centered learning gave respectability to the endless, shapeless, pointless bull session. Too often film and tape legitimized a kind of surrogate teaching: images on the screen or voices on a tape substituting for the live instructor who began the lesson with the "on" switch and ended it with the one labelled "off". Independent study deteriorated into non-directed, randomized forays into — whatever. Because each minority group had a right to its own language, the standard dialect was neglected even though it expedited entry into higher education or other than the dead end job. Because writing was perceived as the coding system of a bygone era, it was virtually dropped from phantom lesson plans in favor of the collage, the improvisation, and a mish-mash of sensitivity-encounter group techniques.

It is tragic that this flamboyant and degraded English became in the public's view, equivalent to the legitimate movement to break the literary-linguistic lockstep that has for so long dominated English teaching. Drilling and testing, manipulating other people's dead sentences, learning data with no apparent application are all defended as strong and bitter medicines, as the only kinds that work to improve the speech and writing of young people. Alas, the medicine is not only bitter, but it usually kills the patient. Filling in the blanks and tinkering with alien sentences out of context, with no voice, no message, and no logical audience has no apparent purpose other than to fill the fifty minute period and provide opportunities for an end-of-the-week test and a mark in the gradebook.

A variant of the lockstep calls for mastery of a grammar systems (an old one or a new one) to improve the way English is used. It has never worked. Those who need help the most find the grammatical system another occasion for failure. Those who master the system really don't need it, because they are already producing reasonably articulate English sentences in their speech and writing. Such language instruction changes very little language behavior except to develop the no-longer-deleted expletive as art form in the English class. The traditional literature course is really a course in literary history and quasi-literary criticism and has repelled more than it has attracted to the printed page. Harpers reports that only one-and-a-half percent of our population regularly reads novels. We were spared knowledge of which novels were selected for reading by this select group.

But good things did happen during the sixties and early seventies. Despite the pressure to join the feel me-touch me-hold me crowd, the filmers and tapers, the political zealots on the one hand and the exercise A, exercise B, fill-in-the-blank, two-chapters-for-homework-and-a-test-tomorrow-gang on the other, teachers dedicated to a more flexible, responsive English did break through to students who never would have been reached. Legions of teachers in the sixties did indeed change the ways their students read, wrote, and thought.

The question remains. Was there really a revolution in teaching in the sixties, or was it only an insurrection, loud but local, confined to a limited number of suburban schools and even there practiced by one or two department troublemakers whose exploits or disasters were publicized while the rest proceeded with English as usual. Could it be that the revolution of the sixties was only stylistic, a remodeling of the creaking fifties vehicle? New

chrome borrowed from audio-visual technology created a shiny exterior for the latest model in educational showrooms. Interior space was rearranged, and at no extra charge we were treated to the wonders of large group-small group instruction and independent study in specially designed carrels. The timing was adjusted so that we could enjoy the comfort of rotating modular schedules and team teaching. They forgot one thing — the engine. It was still obsolete and would break down when the going got rough.

And if films and videotape and independent study and small groups and team teaching and exotic scheduling were used to better identify parts of speech or to demonstrate the desirability of using "different from" instead of "different than" or to transform small trees into larger trees, or to belabor the definition of figurative devices, or to slice the old survey-genre pie into smaller elective pieces — is that teaching to be classified as revolutionary?

It could be argued that traditional English teaching, whether the medium was workbook or videotape, prevailed in most American high schools and is responsible for our present difficulties. While such teaching could pass as adequate in stable times, during that age of future shock, media mayhem, porno-violence, and the decline and fall of practically everything, it could not begin to reach disaffected student populations. It could be argued that such traditional teaching, streamlined or not, was doomed to fail the new and hostile students who were invading the secondary schools, students whose eyes were fixed on the flickering home screen, students who saw no connection between what they did in class and what was happening out there. And the question must be asked: Could any schooling contend with what young people were doing and thinking in those times? Other institutions faltered. It

would have been a miracle if the schools, whatever their pedagogy, didn't list and founder in the cyclonic sixties.

Whatever the case, whether we had more rhetoric than revolution, whether the apparent decline in learning can be attributed to experimental or to streamlined conventional teaching, we are suffering the consequences. In the rush to repudiate everything that happened, or was supposed to have happened during those hectic years, we have virtually lost the options I talked about eight years ago when I described an English curriculum that centered on issue and ideas, that used varied media, and looked to varied student response as a key symptom of learning. Thanks to a resurgent censorship and narrowed view of what our subject is, we have just about lost the option to choose what issues and ideas shall be the intellectual ~~gist~~ for our classes. Thanks to slashed budgets, we have lost the option to use varied media and materials to explore pivotal subjects. Thanks to larger class loads and the demands of a test happy society, we have all but lost the option to plan for responses other than the pre-test, the pop quiz, and the final exam to determine what chemistry has or has not taken place between our subject and our students.

So, where do we go from here? It is time, I think, for a reconciliation among the competing factions in the English teaching universe, factions which have been tearing the profession apart, pulling first in one direction, then in another, depleting teaching energies through continuous imposition of new sure-fire systems of instruction. What happens, of course, is that the new schemes, whether they depend on innovative or neo-traditional approaches are ignored by most teachers who cannot attend yet another series of workshops to learn the intricacies of the new or revitalized disciplines and their nuts-and-

bolts applications in the classroom. And the new teachers (do we have any new teachers these days?), the new teachers are so preoccupied maintaining classroom and personal sanity that will suggest a second year contract to the administration that they abandon all pretense of trying out their methods instructors' whiz-bang schemes for teaching success. Instead they cling for dear life to the exercise A, exercise B, two-chapters-in-the-novel-for-homework-and-a-pop-quiz-tomorrow style of teaching.

Let us then finally call a truce and spend our energies bringing together some of the opposing camps that regularly have at one another at professional meetings, in the journals, and in the popular media. We need to work for a rapprochement between freedom and discipline in English, between student and subject-centeredness, between print and the picture-sound media, between concern for heritages and traditions and concern for contemporary events, between high culture and popular culture, and yes, between humanism and basic skills.

In short it is time to talk about an English for all seasons, immune to changing educational climates and to periodic storms of public outrage. Such an English would permit us to speak with one clear voice about what our subject is and what it can (and cannot) do for those who sit in our classrooms.

First some premises all of us — well, almost all of us — can accept. (I've long ago given up expecting anything approaching unanimity among English teachers.) I think it is fair to describe what goes on in English classrooms as a process of sending messages and receiving messages. Teachers send messages through their lectures and questions, the films they screen, the tapes they play, the guest speakers they introduce, and the printed materials they assign or make available — the novels, plays, poems, short stories that are the stuff of English instruction.

These messages or inputs (if you will forgive the computer jargon) serve several purposes. They familiarize students with the variety of ways fact and feeling can be organized. So we study the characteristic way the poem, the picture, the novel, the play, and the essay send their messages and how through time these ways have changed. More important, teachers send messages that need answering and call for message sending by students. The messages students send to us through their talk, writing, test taking, research papers, projects, and debates tell us what gears have or have not meshed in their intellectual machinery. We find out whether they understand or have been appropriately moved by what they have read, heard, or seen. Most important of all, the messages teachers send initiate students into languaging activity. Such activity gives them an opportunity to produce their own messages. Messages whose words, syntax, and organization provide us with opportunities for instruction and evaluation as we help students to clarify and to intensify the meanings they are trying to convey. Most of us would agree, I think, with the premise that the English class is the place where students should explore the range of message sending and receiving possibilities.

Premise #1 seems to suggest that English is merely a process of stimulus and response. It is more than that. It is a process needing a substance to give it life. Our best bet for engaging students in the process of English is to find those somethings worth Englishing about. Our second premise for an all-weather English suggests that those somethings are the ideas, the dilemmas, and concerns important and interesting (or potentially important and interesting) to adolescents.

Aha, you say, here comes the same old sixties stuff — thematic units on Who Am I?, Who Are You?, and Who Are They?, on Cavorting and Aborting,

on The History of Mystery and The Mystery of History, on Coping, Doping, and Groping. Nothing of the sort. A major criticism of sixties English was its preoccupation with trivial and transient subjects and the neglect of the solid stuff embodied in our rich liberal arts heritage. The criticism is probably justified, although the trivia of the sixties is profound when compared to absurdities of lockstep English some of us are willing to defend to the death.

I propose that we use those major ideas and issues that have been the substance of literary-intellectual inquiry since its beginning, ideas and issues that great and not-so-great writers and artists have addressed and are still addressing. They are, in fact, what the liberal arts and the humanities are all about. These subjects are timeless and must be addressed by each generation, and their grasp by students should rank high on any list of essential competencies. These ideas and issues are about parents and offspring, about male and female, about the individual and the state, about our place in nature, about the idea of progress, about being alone and being part of groups, about the what is real and what is not, about wealth and poverty, about birth, youth, age, and death, about where we have been, where we are, and where we are going.

Are they beyond the reach of today's students? I don't think so. Although they have different names for these underlying concerns, young people are looking for answers in a double-crostick world in which even the questions are hard to make out. They call their timeless themes What's In It For Me? Does he/she like me? What will become of me? Is the world coming apart? Who are the good guys? What did society ever do for me? Live it up while you can. Why can't they just leave me alone? Look out for #1, and why bother?

These questions and concerns, more elegantly put, are what people communicate about — whether in poems, plays and novels or in newspapers and on TV and movie screens. They provide us with a rich and legitimate subject matter to English about. To accommodate it, our inputs to students can range from the literary to the journalistic, from print to pictures, from classic to contemporary, from the profound to the pedestrian. They could include anything that illuminates the subject we are pursuing and validates the message sending and receiving process.

Premise #2 should satisfy those who have commitments to heritages and traditions as well as those who look to contemporary events to reach their students. Moreover, rigorous inquiry demands that both the old and the new be considered, because every tradition and heritage worth exploring has contemporary manifestations, and any contemporary current worthy of class time has its roots in the past. So classic and adolescent novel, myth and newspaper story, the printed play and the television drama, the short story and the song lyric — all have their role as tools of inquiry and as provokers of student response.

The old thematic unit would frequently fail because teachers focused too narrowly on what I have been calling the inputs — the literary materials, the films, and tapes, etc. served to students. The outputs or responses were neglected and rarely went beyond the oral report, the research project, the book report, and the test. The recent Wirtz Commission Report confirms this suggesting that elective units include more disciplined writing assignments. But what does that mean? More literary-critical pieces? More exercises in description, exposition, narration, and argument? Could any scheme have saved composition from becoming the disaster area it has indeed become?

We all know what the problem is. Of all communicative activities, writing is the one that generates the most resistance among students (and makes the greatest demands on teachers). To most students writing is a bizarre activity performed only by professionals and by students — the first under contract, the second under duress. Our students know few people who willingly use writing to communicate ideas, and its use in classrooms only confirms their suspicions that schools deliberately promote activities that have little application for most of the normal (that is to say, non-school) population. After all, who is ever asked to write a paragraph on, or a composition about, or a brief description of? Writing can be justified, however, as its indispensability is demonstrated to students responding to carefully selected materials.

The following three guidelines for composition have been useful:

1. Writing should always be addressed to a logical audience; 2. The vehicle for writing should be a "real form" — not a composition, a paragraph, or an essay, but the letter, the diary or journal entry, the editorial, the telegram, the manifesto, the news story, and a hundred other writing forms that are in use; 3. Students should have frequent opportunities to write in voices other than their own.

Here are just a few examples of writing occasions that might be used in response to conventional literary materials:

1. Write a letter to Julius Caesar warning him of the conspiracy and suggesting some course of action.

2. Write the Wanted Notice for one of the major conspirators. Describe his physical appearance, the kind of a person he is, the crime he committed, and any special dangers he poses to the community.

3. At the high point of the short story the protagonist must take the crucial choice. He/She needs advice. Send the letter that one of the following would send: (a) your mother or father; (b) your minister; (c) one of the minor characters; (d) Ann Landers; (e) you.

4. Write the news story that might be read on the 6 o'clock news describing Macbeth's death and the related circumstances or write the detailed obituary for Macbeth that might appear in your morning newspaper.

Of course, for many classes Macbeth and Julius Caesar will not be the most provocative messages a teacher could send. But in the spirit of reconciliation I did want to indicate how traditional materials can be used to generate writing that uses logical audience, real writing forms, and varied voice.

These are not frivolous assignments. Not only does this kind of writing minimize the stiff, mechanical quality we are so used to in student writing, but it sharpens insights into the events and personal interplay taking place in whatever work is being considered. To write in the voice of a fictional character the student must know him/her better and be able to use words and syntax as that person would. To report or anticipate an incident the circumstances of the plot must be better understood. These assignments make even more demands than do the conventional character sketch or book report. In addition, they encourage the student to participate vicariously in the unfolding events of the novel, or play, or short story — and that participation is a must for any literature program.

During the last twenty minutes or so, I've been receiving subliminal but increasingly insistent messages from around this room. They say, or rather cry out, Basic Skills! Basic Skills! You haven't even mentioned basic skills.

That's what English teaching is all about these days. You can make snide remarks about work books and you-know-who's handbook, but the name of the game that we are all forced to play is fill-in-the-blanks, five-new-words-from-Word Wealth, underline-the-subject-once-and-the-verb-twice, be-prepared-for-the-spelling-pre-test, and kids, your future hinges on your SAT scores. You ivory tower types are too taken up with ideas and issues and real or imagined concerns of students. What about spelling and usage and punctuation? What about writing a decent sentence and knowing how to compose a business letter or to recount a personal experience on paper? Is that too much to ask? If you have no room in your scheme of things for the nitty-gritty of basic skills, count me out.

Not only do we have room for basic skills, they are essential. If the purpose of English is to increase students' abilities to send and receive varied kinds of messages, we must look to the basics to make those processes possible. We would, however, quarrel with the notion that somehow a student learns basic skills from listening to a teacher or doing exercises in a text. He or she may be able to recite the rules, may be able to perform parallel exercises on tests, but most students are probably unable to incorporate the skill in language behavior. Premise #3, of our composite English says, "Basic skills become part of the working ability of a student as they are encountered and mastered in the doing of real language tasks." Drill can support this process, but never substitute for it.

We teachers learned our craft on site in the classroom, not from texts or formal courses which at best provided background and set the scene. The carpenter learns his trade from working with wood and tools, not from lectures or texts. The new swimmer must finally get into the water; the advice from

veterans and the How To Swim manuals are peripheral. So too must the high school English student be plunged into situations demanding authentic language activity. Drill and prescriptions by teachers will help but only if the student is persuaded that they will contribute to some larger, utilitarian end.

The present approach to basics focuses on a given skill removed from any distracting context. It does away as much as possible with seemingly extraneous subject matters in order to zero in on the specific skill — au naturel. Paradoxically, however, as the skill is increasingly isolated, it becomes increasingly inaccessible. What remains finally are rituals and rites performed for the teacher having little bearing on the language tasks that real human beings are asked to fulfill. The sensitive teacher has always provided the larger context in which basic skills are called for to expedite communication. That context is the message sending and receiving about subjects in which students have a stake.

And these messages that students produce are the tests that tell us whether they are succeeding or not and where they need help with the assigned language tasks. The best test is the one that comes closest to simulating the actual language task — the letter, the diary, the dialogue. And it is here that the basics are wedded to substance. Much class time would be given to developing the tools called for by all of this communicative activity. We would be concerned with what words, what syntactical forms, what usages, what conventions are most appropriate, and of course, the messages the students produce become the instructional grist — to be enlarged, contracted, modified, and finally made to fit the subject, the voice of the sender, and the intended audience.

To send that warning letter to Caesar, I mentioned earlier, the student must find the appropriate words, syntax, and organization that present the

dire premise and its crucial supporting details. The letter must describe and narrate and persuade coherently and emphatically — basic writing skills all.

Scene: English class on the day the warning letter to Caesar is due.

Teacher: Alice, Ted, Bob, Carol, please write your letters, as much as you can of them, on the blackboard. While they are doing that will the rest of the class open your handbooks to p. 25 where the model letter appears. Check the mechanics of business letter form with what you see on the board and with what you have on your own papers. What needs attention?

(Corrections in form are made at the board and on students' own letters.)

Now assume you are Caesar, and you have received Bob's letter. Would you know what the writer was talking about? What might confuse you? What can Bob do to clarify his message to Caesar? What words seem inappropriate to the situation or to the recipient of the letter? Can you suggest better ones?

(Suggestions are made, discussed, adopted or rejected.) Are there any sentences that can be eliminated, shortened, or combined? How? Let's do it now. Do you see any errors in spelling or usages that Caesar might resent and use as an excuse to feed the author to the lions? (and so on.)

Assignment for the day after tomorrow:

Exchange letters with the person sitting beside you, and answer it as Caesar might. Your letter should reflect what you learned today about business letter form and conventions, as well as what you know about Caesar and his predicament.

Unless English teachers insist on a definition of English that includes some larger, significant context, they are likely to be replaced by a computerized technology much more efficient at administering the fill-in-the-blank, multiple

choice, drill-and-test that in too many schools currently pass for basic skills instruction. Right now thousands of English teachers are undermining their own professional security as they passively accept the emasculation of their subject. Look for increased class loads and staff reductions when local school boards discover that General Electric and IBM have machines that do the same things English teachers are called upon to do these days — and do it for less money than teachers are getting. Rather than accept downgrading to drill dispensers and testgraders, teachers had better reassert their roles as idea explorers, as context providers, as activity planners. Otherwise, the currently endangered English teacher species will become an extinct one — and soon.

This then is our eclectic English based on sending and receiving varied kinds of messages about important ideas that serve as context for serious basic skills instruction. Will it sell? Probably not now when the mindless back-to-basics decibel count is playing crescendos to packed houses. Led by such media heavies as The New York Times, Eric Sevareid, and Newsweek Magazine, the tune is not likely to be changed in the near future. But as the dropout rate reflects increasing rejection of the schools, as the nation discovers the banality of this kind of instruction, watch for a call to the schools to open the minds of young people, to sensitize them to their roots and to their future, to enable them to handle new life styles mandated by energy depletions and assorted environmental cataclysms. Watch for demands on the schools to develop instructional programs to counter runaway violence and a general crisis in values. Watch for a whole new taxonomy of basic survival skills to materialize. It is happening already. Last month New Jersey's Commissioner of Education said, "We can get ourselves so involved in

basic skills that we'll forget the arts and the humanities." A couple of weeks earlier the newly appointed Director of The National Endowment for The Humanities defined the humanities as "...those disciplines whose function and purpose are self-discovery and the exploration of the human experience." And watch for new catch phrases to package the new instructional commodity. Will they call it Rigorous Humanism? The Living Skills Curriculum? Perhaps sooner than we think it will all burgeon and coalesce into a national trend, and I have no doubts that in the vanguard of the new educational crusade, damning the old and extolling the new will be The New York Times, Eric Sevareid, and Newsweek Magazine.